saalt
SOUTH ASIAN AMERICANS LEADING TOGETHER

Strengthening South Asian Communities in America

Five Years Later: What the Oak Creek anniversary teaches us about white supremacy and the White House

It's been five years since Wade Michael Page, a known white supremacist, shot and murdered six people and injured four others at a Sikh temple in Oak Creek, Wisconsin. For most Americans, that day's shooting was just another senseless act of gun violence. For Sikh, Muslim, South Asian, and Arab Americans, it was a tragic reminder that our communities are in the crosshairs of hate.

While the Oak Creek community remains wounded but united, our nation continues to experience a historic rise in hate violence, particularly under the Trump administration. The spate of anti-immigrant, anti-Muslim, and overall discriminatory policies continue to encourage violence against our communities at staggering rates, leaving many fearful that they will be the next targets of attack.

Since the presidential election, South Asian Americans Leading Together (SAALT) has documented 135 incidents of hate violence against Muslim, Sikh, South Asian, and Arab communities. For context, in our report, "Power, Pain, Potential," SAALT documented 140 incidents of hate violence during the historically divisive president election cycle, when attacks reached levels not seen since the year after 9/11. The latest statistics from the FBI also reveal a 67% increase in anti-Muslim hate crimes across the country. For our diverse communities, it is simply enough to be perceived as Muslim to be a target of attack.

Within these staggering numbers are individual tragedies largely motivated by white supremacist ideologies that were at the core of the Oak Creek massacre. February saw the deadly shooting of two Indian nationals in Kansas by a gunman screaming "get out of my country." Days later a Sikh man was told to "go back to your country" and then shot

on his driveway in Washington State. In May, two men in Portland were stabbed to death while attempting to stop a noted white supremacist from verbally attacking a Muslim passenger on a train. In June, young Nabra Hassanen was brutally murdered near her mosque in Virginia during Ramadan. In July, a Muslim family in Long Island, NY received a series of threatening messages in their mailbox reading the "KKK Hate Muslims, We will kill you, Jesus loves you." Just last week two Sikh men were murdered in separate incidents in California. While the legal process for establishing an incident as a hate crime can linger on for months and even years, we know the rising tide of hate against our communities is moving swiftly.

Hate violence has intensified to historic levels under this administration, but it did not begin here. After the attacks of September 11, 2001, the first person to be killed in a hate incident was a Sikh gas station owner, Balbir Singh Sodhi, in Mesa, Arizona. The shooter, Frank Roque boasted that he wanted to "go out and shoot some towel-heads" before murdering Mr. Sodhi. During his arrest Mr. Roque reportedly shouted, "I'm a patriot and an American!" In May of this year the Portland stabber used a similar rallying cry during his arraignment, stating, "You call it terrorism, I call it patriotism!"

Undoubtedly this administration's policies have contributed to an increasingly hostile national climate. The many attempts at a "Muslim Ban," selective silence in response to tragedies targeting our communities, and persistent xenophobic rhetoric have validated and amplified the views and actions of white supremacists. In "Power, Pain, Potential," then candidate-Trump was responsible for 1 in 5 instances of political hate speech during the 2016 elections. These utterances included a call for a "total and complete shutdown of Muslims entering the United States" and his on the record belief that "I think Islam hates us." The administration has transformed this rhetoric into devastating policy.

Both statements are reminiscent of those made by Brigitte Gabriel, the founder of ACT for America, an organization the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC) classifies as the largest anti-Muslim group in America. Ms. Gabriel has stated, "every practicing Muslim is a radical Muslim" and that Muslims are a "natural threat to civilized people of the world, particularly Western society." The group held a "March Against Shariah" campaign in 30 cities across the country in June, an effort to manufacture hatred and fear for the nation's already embattled Muslim American community.

ACT for America's campaign was met with strong resistance from Muslim, Sikh, South Asian, and Arab American organizations who held alternative events online and offline to drown out messages of hate with calls for love, justice, and inclusion. The administration was notably silent on the subject. ACT for America just launched another national campaign titled "America First" set for September 9. In a video message, Ms. Gabriel states, "let's show our president that we are behind him in securing our nation."

We all deserve to be safe, but "national security" has too often been a false alibi for racism and exclusion. Our nation was founded on the principle that all people should be afforded equality and the freedom of religion, yet that is exactly what this administration's policies are stripping away. Our elected leaders must ensure that our communities can live free from fear of violence based on the color of our skin, how we pray, and our country of origin.

Through activism and commemoration, the Oak Creek community honors Paramjit Kaur, Satwant Singh Kaleka, Prakash Singh, Sita Singh, Ranjit Singh, and Suveg Singh, the Sikh Americans who tragically lost their lives five years ago. For families, friends, and so many in our communities, August 5, 2012 feels like it was just yesterday. With our communities still facing daily attacks, it also feels like just today.